

Original Article

Building Empathy through Art, Photography, Theatre, and Music in a LGBT-focused Health Education Course

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Abstract

Background: The use of art, photography, music, and theatre can provide cultural and emotional context for complex social health issues. Humanities courses often leverage such forms of artistic expression to contextualize complicated and controversial topics. As such, integration of art forms in a health education course can provide important context for understanding abstract health and social justice issues.

Aims: Empathy is key to building bridges between people. How art forms can influence empathy has yet to be explored in the context of the LGBT community. Here we explore how art can help students in a health education course build empathy towards LGBT health and social issues.

Methodology: A qualitative, thematic analysis, using a pre/post-test study design, assessed the perception of undergraduate students on topics of empathy, health disparities, and acceptance of LGBT social issues. A total of 47 responses characterizing student perceptions on these topics were used to define themes both before and after a health humanities course that leveraged LGBT history, health outcomes data, and artistic endeavors as core components of its syllabus.

Results: Interestingly, changes in the themes derived from pre-test to post-test showed student belief in artistic expression as being important, but not sufficient, to drive social acceptance of LGBT issues. However, students did perceive such artistic expression as being crucial to building empathy.

Conclusions: An undergraduate health humanities course with a deep dive into LGBT history, art, photography, theatre, and music not only afforded undergraduate students a way to contextualize LGBT health disparities but also facilitated the development of student empathy toward the LGBT community.

Keywords: health education, empathy, compassion, social determinants of health, LGBT

Introduction

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender communities (herein referred to as LGBT) represent a unique population at-risk for health disparities with minimal research that exists to inform the best strategies and interventions for achieving health equity (IOM, Institute of Medicine, 2011). A university level health humanities course focused on LGBT health disparities can offer a unique opportunity to complement traditional student

education on LGBT health topics with the integration of art and narrative story-telling of the politics and social prejudices relative to specific LGBT community issues and points in time. Literature, art, music, photography, and theatre are well known influencers of individual perception, recognition, opinion-formation, and social justice action. Indeed, the field of health humanities evolved to apply such humanities expressions to facilitate the comprehension and discussion of

complex health concepts and social issues (Stewart and Swain, 2016).

Background: Empathy can be an effective tool in building support structures and positive relationships, evoking compassion, as well as impacting personal behaviors (Rollins et al., 2020; Kesbakhi and Rohani, 2019; Andreychik et al., 2017; Beauvais et al., 2017). Interestingly, the role of literature has been demonstrated to influence empathy, behavior, and bias through narrative transportation (Bal and Veltkamp, 2013; Barnes, 2012; Johnson, 2012; Johnson et al., 2013a; Johnson et al., 2013b). Moreover, literature and art have also been shown to impact one's perspective and evaluation of public health issues and are often used in classroom settings to engage student critical thinking and concept contextualization (Weed, 1995; Lie et al., 2002).

Research Question: In this study, we explored how incorporating art, theatre, photography, and music within a health humanities course could influence student beliefs about the LGBT community, and in particular, whether these forms of human expression could help build empathy. Popular books have been previously leveraged as a framework in the university classroom setting to facilitate student engagement with course material focused on health disparities among at-risk communities (Dimaano and Spigner, 2017; Uy and Dimaano, 2020). Here, we pre-supposed that discussion of art and artists, photography, music, and theatre, in the context of a health humanities course, would serve a similar role in facilitating student engagement and empathy with course material focused on LGBT communities and health concepts. Since no study to date has explored how a health humanities course can impact student empathy towards LGBT issues, we conducted an in-depth study of student perceptions of acceptance and empathy towards the LGBT community and associated health disparities, using art, theatre, photography, and music as a framework for contextualization.

Methodology: We took a qualitative study approach, performing a thematic analysis on a collection of undergraduate student viewpoints to determine how a variety of art forms could shift student empathy, perceptions, ways of thinking, and understanding of the LGBT community. Specifically, our analysis explores student perspectives on whether art forms such as paintings,

music, theatre, or photography, have the ability to lead individuals to becoming more or less empathetic or accepting of the LGBT population and its health concerns. This study was approved as being exempt from Institutional Review Board oversight.

Participants: Our sample consisted of 27 undergraduate students taking a university health science course focused on LGBT communities and health. The study lasted the duration of the 2020 spring semester (16 weeks of instruction). Specific age of our participants ranged from 21-53 years old. Students self-identified as 46% Hispanic/Latinx, 22% Caucasian, 17% Asian, 6.5% Middle Eastern, and 2% African American. Students also self-identified as 78% heterosexual, 13% queer, 9% bisexual, 4% gay, and 2% lesbian. All students were given information on the study goals and background. Informed consent was obtained from each participant.

Pre/post-test question: An 8-item self-administered questionnaire was designed to assess the perspectives of each individual student pertaining to LGBT issues, their understanding and awareness of empathy towards these issues, and the factors that play a role in accepting the LGBT community (see Appendix I). The questionnaire was deployed online via Google Forms before the first week of instruction (herein referred to as pre-course survey or pre-test) and again at the end of the course (similarly referred to as post-course survey or post-test). The questions were open-ended to allow for optimal interpretation of perspectives and opinions as well as the assessment of any changes from pre-test to post-test, following completion of the course (which served as the intervention).

Intervention: The LGBT health education course used as the intervention in this study was a 10-week, 4-credit undergraduate course taught online, asynchronously at a large regional university. The course focuses on understanding health disparities and health inequity from the perspective of the LGBT community. The course explores how cultural expression such as artwork, photography, theatre, and music can impact LGBT health concepts, enabling communities to reflect and respond to LGBT-specific health crises and emerging issues. Syllabus topics include the historical context for the LGBT community and LGBT health disparities, including at-risk sub-populations based on race/ethnicity, age, and

substance abuse. In depth topics covering HIV and AIDS, the trans community, and the fundamentals of health humanities were also core pieces of the first half of the semester. The latter half of the semester covered the art of the AIDS crisis, LGBT photography, movies, theatre, and music, as well as a section on LGBT activism. Weekly readings and video lectures were assigned, alongside weekly required online postings. Students were also required to write two reflection papers and complete a virtual group project analyzing a piece of art, music, or theatre relevant to the LGBT topics covered during the course.

Analysis: A total of 27 students responded to the pre-course survey with 20 students responding to the post-course survey. Survey data was analyzed independently by two researchers. The analysis was done without the use of any coding software. Each researcher independently analyzed the pre- and post-test data, underlining key words and statements, and categorizing them. Categories of key words and statements were then assembled into a codebook. A repetitive process of re-sorting and re-categorizing codes among the researchers, over the course of several weeks, led to consistent coding data from which themes were derived. The researchers, along with the principal investigator, then reviewed the coding data and agreed upon core themes interpreted to be representative of student perceptions in response to survey questions in the pre- and post-test settings.

Results

Pre-test Themes

Art, music, and theatre can raise awareness of a social issue through storytelling and impart an emotional, empathetic response. Responses in the pre-course survey illustrated student perceptions that different forms of art can indeed help to form initial opinions and evoke emotions. Pre-test survey results commonly included examples such as, “Art is a way for people to tell their stories and express their feelings, it allows you to understand what they are going through”. In addition, several responses identified the importance of artistic expression in making a connection with individuals, and in raising the awareness of important topics or issues. As one student notes, “It [art] can make you feel connected to a social issue by bringing awareness to the issue” and another student similarly reflects, “...it [art] is another outlet for people of the community to express themselves and connect with others through

common interests like movies or music”. Interestingly, responses in the pre-test survey also demonstrated student understanding that art can also provide context to important topics. One example of this, taken from a student response includes, “Pictures bring to life what words struggle to describe”.

Core Themes Pre-test: Art, music, and theatre can raise awareness of a social issue through storytelling and imparting an emotional response

- Art is a way for people to tell their stories and express their feelings, it allows you to understand what they are going through.
- It can make you feel connected to a social issue by bringing awareness to the issue
- ...it is another outlet for people of the community to express themselves and connect with others through common interests like movies or music
- Pictures bring to life what words struggle to describe

Though art, music, and theatre can contribute to empathy, one’s up-bringing and preconceived beliefs create a core opinion on social issues

- My cousin came out as lesbian when she was a teen. I was the first one she told and when she told her parents they did not accept it at first because of religion. However now they are accepting of it and I always tell her she can come to me with anything she needs. I always provide her a safe space if she needs one. She is like my little sister so I feel protective of her and want her to be happy.
- I feel that older generations will not change their minds no matter what. But I do feel like it can help influence younger generations.
- I believe the way I was raised not only allowed me to be able to create a safe space for my friends and family, but it allowed me to create a safe space within.
- People grow up with a set of principles they believed their whole lives.

Core Themes Pre-test: Art, music, and theatre are not sufficient to convince one of the acceptance of LGBT social issues, but can help to build empathy through making connections with one’s own emotions

- I do not think my ability to make a supportive and comfortable space for them (LGBT community) has been influenced by LGBT art, music, and theatre. It is because I value their personal story and personal experience more than art pieces.

- I think that if the person's unwillingness to accept the LGBT community is too deeply rooted something like art would not be able to change their view.
- I think a story would help me understand the topic the best because I would be able to relate the most to a real life example and feel empathy for the storyteller

Specific pieces of art, music, and theatre can influence one's empathy: The image David Kirby specifically caught my eye throughout this course. It allowed me to truly understand what the LGBT community suffered through when the HIV/AIDS epidemic surfaced

- The movie RENT made me more empathetic towards the LGBT community
- It can show a side of the topic that people don't normally see, like Nixon's photographs of how AIDS affected patients

Though art, music, and theatre can contribute to developing empathy, one's up-bringing and pre-conceived beliefs create a core opinion on social issues. When further probed about such humanities pieces, student perspectives commonly focused on religious, family, or generational values as being equally formative in their own opinions about LGBT issues. One student example illustrating this includes, "My cousin came out as lesbian when she was a teen. I was the first one she told and when she told her parents they did not accept it at first because of religion. However now they are accepting of it and I always tell her she can come to me with anything she needs. I always provide her with a safe space if she needs one. She is like my little sister so I feel protective of her and want her to be happy". Students also generally reflected on family or generational values as key to informing perspectives on social issues. Representative data include responses such as, "I feel that older generations will not change their minds no matter what. But I do feel like it can help influence younger generations" and similarly from another student, "I believe the way I was raised not only allowed me to be able to create a safe space for my friends and family, but it allowed me to create a safe space within", while another student stated, "People grow up with a set of principles they believed their whole lives".

Post-test Themes:

Art, music, and theatre are not sufficient to convince one of the acceptance of LGBT social issues but can help to build empathy through making connections with one's own emotions. Interestingly, in the post-course survey responses, student perspectives shifted. Student responses still supported artistic expression as being an important piece of building empathy, but the post-test survey data also demonstrated that students believed that influence by the humanities was not enough to formulate acceptance.

Common responses included this example from one student, "I think that if the person's unwillingness to accept the LGBT community is too deeply rooted, something like art would not be able to change their view" while another student retorted, "...most people who are unaccepting of the LGBT community are too stuck in their ways to even try". In addition, many student responses also focused on how artistic pieces do provide an emotional connection, which in turn, allows an empathetic response. Common responses included those such as this student's: "I think a story would help me understand the topic the best because I would be able to relate the most to a real life example and feel empathy for the story teller" while another student stated, "being able to see something in painting or emotionally connect in music gives me better understanding", and yet a third student commented, "I feel that many of the individuals who are not accepting of the LGBT community lack the knowledge and are not open-minded. If they were to see the different art, movies, and documentaries, they would have a better understanding of the challenges the LGBT community has confront[ed] and the fight they have had to put up for their rights". Moreover, many student responses suggested an already overwhelming support of LGBT community issues within the class. One response exemplifying this taken from a student, "I do not think my ability to make a supportive and comfortable space for them [LGBT community] has been influenced by LGBT art, music, and theatre. It is because I value their personal story and personal experience...".

Specific pieces of art, music, and theatre can influence one's ability to demonstrate empathy.

One noticeable shift in the post-course survey data included the increased mention of specific artists, music, or photographs that impacted student empathy. Whereas in the pre-test not many artistic endeavors were connected with the LGBT community or health issues, in the post-test, students commonly mentioned or referred to specific pieces that impacted them. For example, one student mentioned photography as particularly impactful, "The image [of] David Kirby specifically caught my eye throughout the course. It allowed me to truly understand what the LGBT community suffered through when the HIV/AIDS epidemic surfaced" and another similarly stated, "it [photography] can show a side of the topic that people don't normally see, like in Nixon's photographs of how AIDS affected patients". Popular artwork studied during the course was also reflected in student post-test responses. For example, one student commented, "The art of Keith Haring has helped me understand and empathize with the struggle of LGBT health and the oppression they endured" and another retorted, "I found his [Keith Haring's] work eye catching and vibrant and just got caught up in learning more about the meanings for the different designs. Even though they may have looked simple they could reach a lot of people". Many student responses also connected a specific piece with its ability to influence empathy. For example, as one student mentions, "The movie *RENT* made me more empathetic towards the LGBT community".

Discussion

This qualitative study assessed student perspectives generated from a LGBT health humanities course which used art, music, photography, and theatre to contextualize key concepts. We identified four themes that emerged from the student response data, two themes in the pre-test and two in the post-test (see Table 1). Pre-course survey data suggest that students were well in tuned to the impact that various works of artistic expression could have on one's emotions. Responses in the pre-test commonly referred to artistic expression as a powerful tool in expressing emotions with the ability to build bridges between people through story telling. Moreover, student perceptions narrowed in on the concept that there can be an impact from different art forms in

terms of building empathy but that other factors, such as family influence, generational values, and religious beliefs also factor into how one forms his/her/their core opinions when it comes to the LGBT community.

Responses in the post-course survey data suggest that students believed that although forms of artistic expression do indeed help to build empathy toward LGBT issues, such artistic endeavors alone were still not sufficient to convince one of accepting the LGBT community. Much of the course focus was a deep dive into the health disparities found amongst the LGBT community, including risks from an age-perspective, race and ethnicity, and substance abuse. In addition, week long sessions on HIV and AIDS, as well as the trans community and trans issues, provided fundamental knowledge from a health outcomes perspective. The first half of the semester was used as a foundational set-up for the second half of the semester which then focused on humanities pieces including the art of the AIDS crisis where coverage of the AIDS quilt, music, art, and theatre were discussed in great detail, as well as LGBT photography, and activism. Interestingly, student responses in the pre- and post-course surveys generally remained consistent regarding how art can help to build empathy, provide context, and make emotional connections. But even after a full semester of coursework and exposure to LGBT art forms, students perceived that it takes more than just exposure to art to impact acceptance. It is likely that the breadth of history, health outcomes data, and discussion of socio-political issues covered during the course highlighted the complex nature of the LGBT movement. Therefore, students perceived that in-depth education to understand complicated intersectionality, was needed in addition to the context provided by art, music, or theatre, in order to synergistically form strong opinions in support of the LGBT community.

Notably, and not surprisingly, post-test data showed the student's ability to give deeper, specific examples of LGBT artistic expression that have made an impact on their ability to become more empathetic. The second half of the course focused on specific artists such as Keith Haring, and photographers such as Nicholas Nixon, Sunil Gupta, and Therese Frare, as well as theatrical productions such as *RENT* and *And the Band Played On*. Many more artists, songs, photographs, and specific pieces

were mentioned in the post-test data compared to pre-test, in addition to responses that illustrated how such pieces connected the students emotionally with LGBT issues. As previously discussed, an underlying and consistent theme in the pre- and post-test data was the student perception that art can help build empathy toward the LGBT community. In the post-test, students called out how specific pieces made them more empathetic, demonstrating a level of self-reflection and introspection taken on by the students because of the context provided by the course content and discussion. For example, both Nixon and Frare's vivid photographs of patients dying with AIDS resonated with many students. Indeed, this same effect has been reproducibly observed where deeper, more specific engagement from students occurred following similar interventions providing important context using popular books (Dimaano and Spigner, 2017; Uy and Dimaano, 2020).

Our study suggests that a health humanities course focused on LGBT communities and health, which uses artistic expression to provide cultural context, can facilitate the development of student empathy. It is probable that student perceptions evolved post-intervention due to the time students spent observing, thinking about, and discussing specific pieces of LGBT art forms, in addition to the in-depth content covered on LGBT health disparities. Students were immersed from an academic and artistic perspective, drawing them into a reflection of LGBT issues both intellectually and emotionally. Students received an understanding of the importance of not only data to educate on the health outcomes perspective, but also the social aspect of connecting emotionally with health issues via artistic expression. Weekly online postings, writing two reflection papers, and focusing on a final project based on a specific piece of art, served as a comprehensive method for immersion into the LGBT community where empathy is key to understanding complex social and health issues. Cumulatively these exposures likely shaped students' complex view of LGBT health disparities, as well as how students became emotionally connected, both contributing to empathy building.

Limitations: As part of the intervention/health education course, students discussed pre-identified topics of LGBT health and art on a weekly basis. Due to the design of this study, we did not capture

the different dimensions of these weekly online discussions and rather focused only on the pre- and post-course surveys to illustrate how student perceptions evolved over time. It is possible that the content of these weekly discussions also contributed to how students formed opinions and perspectives from pre- to post-test. Additional limitations normally associated with conducting a qualitative study are also limitations here. Each question in the 8-item survey was independently reviewed by the researchers and principal investigator to evaluate whether the questions asked what they purported to ask but the questions were not previously validated, nor were they pilot tested. The same 8 questions were asked in both pre- and post-course surveys, and so answers in the post-test may have been influenced by how students answered in the pre-test.

Conclusion: Our study demonstrates how the use of art, photography, theatre, and music can bring complex social and health issues of the LGBT community into a teaching format where students may not only dive deep into the subject of LGBT health disparities, but also do so under a framework that helps to facilitate empathy. Popular books have been previously shown to provide contextual support for student understanding of complex health topics such as health disparities, medical ethics, and multicultural health issues (Dimaano and Spigner, 2017; Uy and Dimaano, 2020). Here we show that the use of art, theatre, photography, and music can be used similarly in the undergraduate classroom setting to invoke an empathetic response towards LGBT communities and health outcomes. Such artistic expression can place history, politics, socio-economic status, discrimination, and health outcomes data into a context that facilitates not only student engagement but more importantly, builds student empathy toward at-risk populations where empathy is often needed most.

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Appendix I *Survey questions*

Q1. How do you identify yourself in terms of:

- a. Racial background
- b. Sexual orientation
- c. Gender identity
- d. Age

Q2. How can art make you feel connected to a social issue?

Q3. What form of art has the biggest impact on your emotions: drawings/paintings, photography, movies/theatre, or music? Explain.

Q4. When trying to understand a complicated topic, do you feel you like a narrative (like a story or book) or a piece of art can help in your own perceptions and understanding of the topic? Explain.

Q5. How can art make you feel more empathetic to people? Can you name specific art (drawing/painting, photography, theatre/movie, music) that has made you personally more empathetic to a person or a cause?

Q6. Do you think art, theatre, and music can help those unaccepting of the LGBT community better understand and empathize with this population more? Explain.

Q7. Do you think there are any forms of art existing that misrepresent the LGBT community negatively?

Q8. Do you know anyone who identifies themselves as LGBTQ? If so, do you believe your ability to make a supportive and comfortable space for them has been influenced by LGBT art, music, or theatre? Explain.